

The true bride

There was once on a time a girl who was young and beautiful, but she had lost her mother when she was quite a child, and her step-mother did all she could to make the girl's life wretched. Whenever this woman gave her anything to do, she worked at it indefatigably, and did everything that lay in her power. Still she could not touch the heart of the wicked woman by that; she was never satisfied; it was never enough. The harder the girl worked, the more work was put upon her, and all that the woman thought of was how to weigh her down with still heavier burdens, and make her life still more miserable.

One day she said to her, "Here are twelve pounds of feathers which thou must pick, and if they are not done this evening, thou mayst expect a good beating. Dost thou imagine thou art to idle away the whole day?" The poor girl sat down to the work, but tears ran down her cheeks as she did so, for she saw plainly enough that it was quite impossible to finish the work in one day. Whenever she had a little heap of feathers lying before her, and she sighed or smote her hands together in her anguish, they flew away, and she had to pick them out again, and begin her work anew. Then she put her elbows on the table, laid her face in her two hands, and cried, "Is there no one, then, on God's earth to have pity on me?" Then she heard a low voice which said, "Be comforted, my child, I have come to help thee." The maiden looked up, and an old woman was by her side. She took the girl kindly by the hand, and said, "Only tell me what is troubling thee." As she spoke so kindly, the girl told her of her miserable life, and how one burden after another was laid upon her, and she never could get to the end of the work which was given to her. "If I have not done these feathers by this evening, my step-mother will beat me; she has threatened she will, and I know she keeps her word." Her tears began to flow again, but the good old woman said, "Do not be afraid, my child; rest a while, and in the meantime I will look to thy work." The girl lay down on her bed, and soon fell asleep. The old woman seated herself at the table with the feathers, and how they did fly off the quills, which she scarcely touched with her withered hands! The twelve pounds were soon finished, and when the girl awoke, great snow-white heaps were lying, piled up, and everything

in the room was neatly cleared away, but the old woman had vanished. The maiden thanked God, and sat still till evening came, when the step-mother came in and marvelled to see the work completed. "Just look, you awkward creature," said she, "what can be done when people are industrious; and why couldst thou not set about something else? There thou sittest with thy hands crossed." When she went out she said, "The creature is worth more than her salt. I must give her some work that is still harder."

Next morning she called the girl, and said, "There is a spoon for thee; with that thou must empty out for me the great pond which is beside the garden, and if it is not done by night, thou knowest what will happen." The girl took the spoon, and saw that it was full of holes; but even if it had not been, she never could have emptied the pond with it. She set to work at once, knelt down by the water, into which her tears were falling, and began to empty it. But the good old woman appeared again, and when she learnt the cause of her grief, she said, "Be of good cheer, my child. Go into the thicket and lie down and sleep; I will soon do thy work." As soon as the old woman was alone, she barely touched the pond, and a vapour rose up on high from the water, and mingled itself with the clouds. Gradually the pond was emptied, and when the maiden awoke before sunset and came thither, she saw nothing but the fishes which were struggling in the mud. She went to her step-mother, and showed her that the work was done. "It ought to have been done long before this," said she, and grew white with anger, but she meditated something new.

On the third morning she said to the girl, "Thou must build me a castle on the plain there, and it must be ready by the evening." The maiden was dismayed, and said, "How can I complete such a great work?" - "I will endure no opposition," screamed the step-mother. "If thou canst empty a pond with a spoon that is full of holes, thou canst build a castle too. I will take possession of it this very day, and if anything is wanting, even if it be the most trifling thing in the kitchen or cellar, thou knowest what lies before thee!" She drove the girl out, and when she entered the valley, the rocks were there, piled up one above the other, and all her strength would not have enabled her

even to move the very smallest of them. She sat down and wept, and still she hoped the old woman would help her. The old woman was not long in coming; she comforted her and said, "Lie down there in the shade and sleep, and I will soon build the castle for thee. If it would be a pleasure to thee, thou canst live in it thyself." When the maiden had gone away, the old woman touched the gray rocks. They began to rise, and immediately moved together as if giants had built the walls; and on these the building arose, and it seemed as if countless hands were working invisibly, and placing one stone upon another. There was a dull heavy noise from the ground; pillars arose of their own accord on high, and placed themselves in order near each other. The tiles laid themselves in order on the roof, and when noon-day came, the great weather-cock was already turning itself on the summit of the tower, like a golden figure of the Virgin with fluttering garments. The inside of the castle was being finished while evening was drawing near. How the old woman managed it, I know not; but the walls of the rooms were hung with silk and velvet, embroidered chairs were there, and richly ornamented arm-chairs by marble tables; crystal chandeliers hung down from the ceilings, and mirrored themselves in the smooth pavement; green parrots were there in gilt cages, and so were strange birds which sang most beautifully, and there was on all sides as much magnificence as if a king were going to live there. The sun was just setting when the girl awoke, and the brightness of a thousand lights flashed in her face. She hurried to the castle, and entered by the open door. The steps were spread with red cloth, and the golden balustrade beset with flowering trees. When she saw the splendour of the apartment, she stood as if turned to stone. Who knows how long she might have stood there if she had not remembered the step-mother? "Alas!" she said to herself, "if she could but be satisfied at last, and would give up making my life a misery to me." The girl went and told her that the castle was ready. "I will move into it at once," said she, and rose from her seat. When they entered the castle, she was forced to hold her hand before her eyes, the brilliancy of everything was so dazzling. "Thou seest," said she to the girl, "how easy it has been for thee to do this; I ought to have given thee something harder." She went through all the rooms, and examined every corner to see if anything was wanting or defective; but she could discover nothing. "Now we will go down below," said she,

looking at the girl with malicious eyes. "The kitchen and the cellar still have to be examined, and if thou hast forgotten anything thou shalt not escape thy punishment." But the fire was burning on the hearth, and the meat was cooking in the pans, the tongs and shovel were leaning against the wall, and the shining brazen utensils all arranged in sight. Nothing was wanting, not even a coal-box and water-pail. "Which is the way to the cellar?" she cried. "If that is not abundantly filled, it shall go ill with thee." She herself raised up the trap-door and descended; but she had hardly made two steps before the heavy trap-door which was only laid back, fell down. The girl heard a scream, lifted up the door very quickly to go to her aid, but she had fallen down, and the girl found her lying lifeless at the bottom.

And now the magnificent castle belonged to the girl alone. She at first did not know how to reconcile herself to her good fortune. Beautiful dresses were hanging in the wardrobes, the chests were filled with gold or silver, or with pearls and jewels, and she never felt a desire that she was not able to gratify. And soon the fame of the beauty and riches of the maiden went over all the world. Wooers presented themselves daily, but none pleased her. At length the son of the King came and he knew how to touch her heart, and she betrothed herself to him. In the garden of the castle was a lime-tree, under which they were one day sitting together, when he said to her, "I will go home and obtain my father's consent to our marriage. I entreat thee to wait for me here under this lime-tree, I shall be back with thee in a few hours." The maiden kissed him on his left cheek, and said, "Keep true to me, and never let any one else kiss thee on this cheek. I will wait here under the lime-tree until thou returnest.

The maid stayed beneath the lime-tree until sunset, but he did not return. She sat three days from morning till evening, waiting for him, but in vain. As he still was not there by the fourth day, she said, "Some accident has assuredly befallen him. I will go out and seek him, and will not come back until I have found him." She packed up three of her most beautiful dresses, one embroidered with bright stars, the second with silver moons, the third with golden suns, tied up a handful of jewels in her handkerchief, and set out. She inquired everywhere for her betrothed, but no one had seen him; no one knew anything about him. Far and wide did she wander through the world, but she found him not. At last she hired herself to a farmer as a cow-herd,

and buried her dresses and jewels beneath a stone.
And now she lived as a herdsman, guarded her herd, and was very sad and full of longing for her beloved one; she had a little calf which she taught to know her, and fed it out of her own hand, and when she said,

"Little calf, little calf, kneel by my side,
And do not forget thy shepherd-maid,
As the prince forgot his betrothed bride,
Who waited for him 'neath the lime-tree's shade."
the little calf knelt down, and she stroked it.

And when she had lived for a couple of years alone and full of grief, a report was spread over all the land that the King's daughter was about to celebrate her marriage. The road to the town passed through the village where the maiden was living, and it came to pass that once when the maiden was driving out her herd, her bridegroom travelled by. He was sitting proudly on his horse, and never looked round, but when she saw him she recognized her beloved, and it was just as if a sharp knife had pierced her heart. "Alas!" said she, "I believed him true to me, but he has forgotten me."

Next day he again came along the road. When he was near her she said to the little calf,

"Little calf, little calf, kneel by my side,
And do not forget thy shepherd-maid,
As the prince forgot his betrothed bride,
Who waited for him 'neath the lime-tree's shade."

When he was aware of the voice, he looked down and reined in his horse. He looked into the herd's face, and then put his hands before his eyes as if he were trying to remember something, but he soon rode onwards and was out of sight. "Alas!" said she, "he no longer knows me," and her grief was ever greater.

Soon after this a great festival three days long was to be held at the King's court, and the whole country was invited to it.

"Now will I try my last chance," thought the maiden, and when evening came she went to the stone under which she had buried her treasures. She took out the dress with the golden suns, put it on, and adorned herself with the jewels. She let down her hair, which she had concealed under a handkerchief, and it fell down in long curls about her, and thus she went into the town, and in the darkness was observed by no one. When she entered the brightly-lighted hall, every one started back in amazement, but no one knew who she was. The King's son went to meet her, but he did not

recognize her. He led her out to dance, and was so enchanted with her beauty, that he thought no more of the other bride. When the feast was over, she vanished in the crowd, and hastened before daybreak to the village, where she once more put on her herd's dress.

Next evening she took out the dress with the silver moons, and put a half-moon made of precious stones in her hair. When she appeared at the festival, all eyes were turned upon her, but the King's son hastened to meet her, and filled with love for her, danced with her alone, and no longer so much as glanced at anyone else. Before she went away she was forced to promise him to come again to the festival on the last evening.

When she appeared for the third time, she wore the star-dress which sparkled at every step she took, and her hair-ribbon and girdle were starred with jewels. The prince had already been waiting for her for a long time, and forced his way up to her. "Do but tell who thou art," said he, "I feel just as if I had already known thee a long time." - "Dost thou not know what I did when thou leftest me?" Then she stepped up to him, and kissed him on his left cheek, and in a moment it was as if scales fell from his eyes, and he recognized the true bride. "Come," said he to her, "here I stay no longer," gave her his hand, and led her down to the carriage. The horses hurried away to the magic castle as if the wind had been harnessed to the carriage. The illuminated windows already shone in the distance. When they drove past the lime-tree, countless glow-worms were swarming about it. It shook its branches, and sent forth their fragrance. On the steps flowers were blooming, and the room echoed with the song of strange birds, but in the hall the entire court was assembled, and the priest was waiting to marry the bridegroom to the true bride.

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